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Help – My Dog Is On Exercise Restriction!



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How to keep you and your dog sane when they are on exercise restriction and/or confinement following surgery, injury or illness.

When your beloved canine friend undergoes surgery, gets injured, or falls ill, it often means a period of confinement and restricted exercise. This can be a very challenging time both for your dog and for you. However it is possible to provide alternative activities and entertainment and by doing so, reduce the risk of further injury or relapse, aid in your dog's recovery, and help maintain their well-being.

My sister recently faced this situation when her very energetic and lively adolescent dog had surgery on both elbow joints. The vet instructed her to keep him confined to a small pen and limit his exercise to short toilet breaks initially. Over a 12-week period, she was allowed to gradually increase his activity to short on lead walks, building up duration slowly. Like many dog owners, she found this period of restricted exercise very challenging.

Even calmer or older dogs can experience stress during extended confinement, which only adds to the inevitable stress caused by surgery, time spent at the veterinary clinic, possible pain, incapacity, or feeling unwell. This additional stress can impact recovery, contribute to negative emotional states such as frustration or depression, and lead to behavioural challenges.

What is Enrichment?

Enrichment is about meeting your dog's needs as closely as possible to how they would be met in their natural environment. It empowers them to engage in species-typical behaviours in healthy and appropriate ways. Enrichment is essential for a dog's everyday life, but becomes even more important when they are unable to move freely, exercise, and explore as they normally would.

The Benefits of Enrichment

Studies have shown that providing enrichment activities for dogs can have a significant positive impact on their behaviour. Enrichment provision during pregnancy and early life can mitigate the risk of later behavioural problems in adult dogs. Engaging in scent work-type enrichment has been shown to promote a positive cognitive bias. In a study on mice it was even found that enrichment could prevent the transmission of negative behavioural symptoms such as anxiety or aggression across generations from parents to offspring.

In kennelled dogs, enrichment has been shown to decrease stress, anxiety, and fear-induced aggression, and helps to promote stress resilience in general.

Given that confinement can be stressful for most dogs, providing enrichment activities can help minimize that stress, aid in recovery, improve welfare, and help owners support their dogs through a challenging time.

Choosing the Right Enrichment

When selecting enrichment activities for your dog, it's important to consider their individual preferences. Enrichment should be something that your dog finds genuinely enriching and enjoyable so try to spend time figuring what works for your dog. It is also important that your dog has the necessary skills and abilities to effectively interact or engage with the activities and/or items presented to them, so we should always consider age, ability and experience/skill level.

Food-based enrichment, such as puzzle toys or feeders that slow down feeding, is commonly used for pet dogs. However, adolescent dogs or highly food-motivated dogs may find challenging puzzles stressful and frustrating if they cannot easily access the food. Very young, elderly, or incapacitated dogs may also have difficulty physically manipulating certain types of feeders.

It is recommended to provide food-related enrichment after your dog has recently eaten at least a portion of their normal meal. Frustration can be increased by low blood sugar levels, so a hungry dog may get frustrated more easily, which can add to rather than diminish stress.

Enrichment to Support Recovery and Rehabilitation

During a period of post-operative confinement and exercise restriction, it's important to consider the type of enrichment activities that are safe for your dog. Both static and slow, calm movement-based activities can be suitable options, as directed by your vet's advice.

For young and adolescent dogs, static or slow enrichment can also help mitigate the "rebound effect" caused by restricted freedom of movement. Rebound behaviours are normal behaviours that may be done to excess due to a period of limited ability to act out those behaviours.

Veterinary behaviourist Amber Batson recommends the use of enrichment stations. These stations are located outside the confinement area and along the path to the toileting or exercise area. They consist of bowls, plates, or boxes containing items or food for your dog to investigate, sniff, lick, or search for. By keeping their nose down and engaging with the stations, dogs can move slowly and remain calm during their outings. These stations can also be used to provide controlled exercise as part of the rehabilitation process.

Options for Static and Calming Enrichment

Enrichment can be provided in various ways, incorporating more than just food and food toys. It's important to consider all of your dog's needs and preferences. Providing a range of sensory inputs and foraging opportunities offers the opportunity for so much more than just food consumption, while also allowing for safe and appropriate movement as part of the recovery process.

Types of enrichment activities other than food include olfactory (scent-based), auditory (sound-based), visual, and tactile. Depending on how they are provided, these activities can engage other sensory processing systems such as vestibular, proprioceptive, and interoceptive.

Examples:

Food

- Lickimats or homemade versions such as muffin tins (use small amounts of low calorie food for example natural yogurt or cooked vegetables blended with salt free chicken broth or a little tinned sardine).
- Longer lasting chews such as Paddywack, Himalayan chews, cows feet.
- Puzzle feeders/snuffle mats.

Scent

- Bring walks home by collecting sticks, leaves, grasses, feathers, pine cones, sheep wool etc. Place on a non-slip mat in a large shallow box near the pen and allow the dog to rummage and sniff.
- Ask human friends/neighbours of the dog to provide worn socks or a t-shirt, and/or dog friend's bedding or toys (this may also help buffer the lack of social enrichment opportunities during the recovery period).
- Provide scented cloths - these can be scented with different odours such as other animals (watch for over arousal), herbs, spices and hydrolats (natural waters collected from plants during the distillation process - a safer option than essential oils).

Sound

- Music - classical seems to be the best but provide variety to avoid habituation
- Radio - talking channels, audio books
- Sit and read a book to them/with them
- Dog TV - there are a number of options on YouTube now for example.

Enrichment stations

- A novel item to investigate.
- Something to lick, try different surfaces smooth, rough and observe for preferences.
- Something to search for - food or a toy hidden in a snuffle mat or puzzle toy.
- Something scented - cloths, toys, clothes etc.

In summary, enforced confinement and exercise restriction after surgery or due to illness can be stressful for both dogs and their owners. This is especially true for adolescent dogs who may have difficulty coping with frustration. Providing appropriate and individualized static and slow movement-based enrichment during this period can significantly reduce stress, frustration, and boredom levels. It also helps owners effectively manage their dogs during this challenging time.